

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**Patronal Festival – St Philip the Deacon**  
**11 October 2009**

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Collect, APB p.310  
Isaiah 53:7-11  
Psalm 67  
Acts 8:26-40  
Mt 28:18-20 (Readings from the Good News Bible)

May I speak in the name of God, whose promises to us are still fulfilled today in Jesus Christ his Son, through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Dear people of God of St Philip the Deacon, let me say again what a great pleasure it is to be with you as you celebrate your patronal festival.

Thank you, to the wardens, for your invitation, and also to Fr Trevor Steyn for standing in, during Fr Michael Weeder's absence.

I very much enjoyed my visit to St Philip's a year ago, at the evening we had of '100 men and more, thanking God'.

Today I am glad to be back – with more than 100 of us, and more than just men! – thanking God once again, for his faithfulness to us, and to this Church, through the many turbulent years of its history.

We see God's faithfulness through the way that his promises are fulfilled in our lives.

Whenever we recognise, and share with one another, how we experience God's presence and promises, we are following in the footsteps of Philip.

Philip was one of the seven deacons who were appointed to help in the practical running of the church, so that the apostles could devote their time to prayer and preaching.

But though the seven were skilled administrators, they were evidently also people of great faith, and ready to rise to the challenge of sharing it, whenever they got the opportunity.

This should be an encouragement to every Christian. You do not have to be a member of the clergy, or even a lay minister, to be able to speak about Jesus.

God will help all of us who love and follow Jesus, to talk about our faith.

The most famous of the seven deacons was Stephen, who was arrested on false charges, and brought before the Jewish Council; and who gave a long and thorough defence of his beliefs, before being stoned to death.

We remember him as the first Christian martyr – and a very remarkable man he was too.

Perhaps he is a bit TOO remarkable for us to identify with easily.

But Philip seems someone whose life is rather closer to ours – and we can learn from the way God worked in him, about how God can work in us also.

One day, says the Book of Acts, an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip.

Perhaps you are immediately going to say to me that you have never heard an angel speak to you – so right away you feel nothing in common with Philip!

But let's pause, and imagine exactly what Philip experienced. A supernatural being with huge white wings, and a trumpet-like voice?

Well, I must admit that I have never experienced that either.

But I have experience this – the sense, the conviction, inside me, that arises from nowhere, like words without a voice, that I should do this, or say that, or somehow focus my energies on a particular issue.

And I really need this guidance from God! Because there are so many demands on an Archbishop's time, and not enough hours in the day to do them all – and my diary gets very full!

But sometimes, as I sit in my chapel for Morning and Evening Prayer and the daily Eucharist, or else just take a moment at other points of the day, to be still in the presence of the Lord – then in that resting silence, a conviction comes to me.

This is first lesson I want to draw from the life of Philip – we have to make space to listen to God, in case he does have something to tell us!

During the Administration of Communion, in particular, there is room for quiet prayer and listening.

Yet we can also make space to sit quietly before God at other times in the week.

Be conscious of being in God's presence; ask him if he has anything to say to you; and just sit – perhaps watch the clouds on the mountain, or anything else that helps you quieten your mind and relax.

Remember, God gave us two ears and one mouth, so perhaps we ought to do twice as much listening to God as talking to him!

It was listening like this, and feeling a growing conviction rise within me, when I felt last year I ought to go to Zimbabwe.

It's like a hunch, like a nagging idea that does not let me go. Do you know what I am talking about? I'm sure many of you do!

So what do I do then, when I get such a conviction? Like Philip, I try it out!

It's like trying to push at a door, and seeing if it opens.

I pray 'Lord, have I understood right? IS this what you want me to be doing? I'm going to check it out – and if it's not the right thing, please stop me!'

Sometimes it doesn't work out – and then I see that I might have misunderstood – or else misinterpreted what my response to a situation ought to be.

Sometimes God just wants me to hold the matter in my heart, in my prayers. Sometimes I ought to issue statements, or make phone calls, or galvanise someone else to act. And sometimes it is down to me to do something.

But the only way I can find out which it is, is to begin to take the steps, to try out a first move, and see what follows.

I guess that this is what Philip did. He didn't ask for an explanation of why he had to go to the Gaza road. He just got ready and went.

And because he was prepared to take the risk for God, God used him!

There was the Ethiopian official, sitting in his carriage, reading out loud from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

And Philip recognised the passage, and recognised that it spoke about Jesus, and dared to open up a conversation, because he saw that God was indeed at work in that situation.

So here is the next challenge to us – to know our Bibles, and what they tell us about God, about Jesus in whom God's promises are fulfilled.

Because how will we recognise God at work in our lives, and in the lives of others, if we don't know him well?

How will we spot the finger-prints of God in our daily circumstances, if we are not thoroughly familiar with him, and the way he works?

How can we help others open their eyes, and see Jesus, and respond to him, if we are not able ourselves to identify his presence?

Indeed, we also need to respond to him – and to do that, we first have to be in tune with him, to be on the same wavelength, to be alert and receptive to what he has to communicate to us.

Let's pause and consider this for a while.

What sort of evidence of God at work might we be on the look-out for?

One example might be the fruit of the Spirit.

Do you remember them? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

When did you last experience love – the best of love – unselfish, compassionate, truly caring love?

God was there! That's his work!

And what about joy?

Or peace? – especially when you sense a seed of peace in the middle of chaos, mess and muddle, even pain and trauma.

Can you latch onto it, and open yourself to it, and help others find it too – and know yourselves held in the shalom peace of God, right at the heart of the storms of life?

What about patience? We live in a society that's not good at patience! We need God's help to be more patient, more generous hearted, with one another. So we need to recognise it, when he is offering it to us, and take hold of it with both hands – and help others to do the same, doing so in his strength, with his help.

And we can do the same with other characteristics of God, and of Jesus – wherever there is healing and wholeness; wherever good comes out of bad; wherever there is forgiveness and redemption and transfiguration; wherever new life triumphs, wherever death does not have the last word.

It can be helpful to end each day by spending a few minutes just reviewing all that has happened, and asking God to open our eyes to see more clearly where we encountered him at work – and then thanking him for this.

Because this will help us in developing the habit of recognising him, actually as we do encounter him.

For then we can live more fully in his presence, more fully by his strength, and so be better able to follow him confidently, through the challenges of our uncertain, multi-faith world.

And we will also be better able to help our broken and hurting world to find the God whose love, whose redemption, we all so desperately need – and which we find revealed in Jesus Christ, as we turn to him, and accept him as our Saviour and Lord, like the Ethiopian official – who then went on his way full of joy.

This is one of the goals we discussed at the clergy and layworkers' conference at Goudini last week ...

Our hope within the Diocese is to set up teams which ...

So, dear people of St Philips, my prayer for you is that you will find St Philip a model for your lives – that you will grow in learning to listen to the promptings of God, that you will grow in recognising the active presence of God in your life and the life of this community, and that you will grow in sharing them with others – so that the joy of the Lord may abound in you all.

Amen.